

*THE LIFE-GIVING PULSES OF GOOD URBAN GOVERNANCE*

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## Introduction

Fully aware of the importance of innovative technologies in good urban governance, I am here to present a line of argument that if good governance is to be life-giving at all to the people, the persons behind the governance have to be the living embodiment of the life-sustaining cultural and religious ethos and values of a given human settlement.

Good governance is fundamentally about governing people through the concerted regulation of two interrelated kinds of relationship: first, the interracial-cultural-religious relation between diverse peoples in a geographical location; second, the relation between humankind and the environment, inclusive of the use of land for buildings and the impact of such construction on the surrounding flora and fauna. Since good governance is primarily about people, it has to be impacted by the various ethical, cultural and religious values as it takes cognizance of the importance of the diverse cultures, ethos and religions in a given urban setting. Ultimately good governance is about meaning that the different people lived out in the urban human settlements rather than the buildings in their aesthetic appearances.

### 1. Interrelations Between People Of Diverse Cultures

Governance is primarily about people, people of diverse cultures, ethos and religions. For governance to be life-giving to the people within a given human settlement, it has to take cognizance of the cultural and religious ethos and values of the people because they represent the life-giving pulses of good governance. Therefore, it is imperative that the “governors” periodically commission interdisciplinary research that continually identify and inculcate those cultural and religious values and ethos. These ethos and values must be “institutionalized” so that they constitute the substance of laws, policies and regulations of any good governance.

Clifford Geertz's offers an understanding of culture which states that the inhabitants are “suspended in *webs of significance*” they have spun.<sup>1</sup> Cultures, Geertz reminds us are, “those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one *in search of meaning*.” (Italics are mine). Moreover Geertz emphasizes that “culture is public because meaning is.”<sup>2</sup> Ethos refers to the set of ideas and moral attitudes belonging to a person or groups while religion points to people's belief that establishes the believers' relationship with the transcendence or the divine known as God and this relationship impinges on one's relationship with fellow human beings and the environment. When these cultural and religious ethos and values are properly translated into laws, policies and regulations through good

governance, they become the life-giving pulses that confers greater meaning on people in a given human settlement.

By way of illustration, allow me to mention the coming World Peace Concert (WPC), the first of its kind in Malaysia and Asia in the year 2002. The concert will be held at the indoor stadium of Johor Baru this coming Saturday night, October 12, 2002, in the indoor stadium of Johor Baru. The World Peace Concert 2002 is organized by a JB-based organizing committee, in partnership with a radio station known as WOW FM. It is endorsed by MERCY Malaysia, Persatuan Karyawan Malaysia and the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Before the actual event, there are a series of planned events that culminate in the concert itself: (a) the Golf Tournament on September 15, 2002, b) the Malam Muhibbah on Monday, September 30, 2002; (b) the Pre-Launch Party on Saturday, October 5, 2002, (c) the Special Performance of the artiste for world peace at the concourse at City square on Friday night, October 11, 2002.

The aim of these events is to gather together Malaysians from the different walks of life, from the diverse cultures, races and religions so that world peace is experienced as *a way of life* as we learn to relate to each other as fellow human beings and fellow Malaysians. We need to learn to collaborate together in a common effort that enjoins Malaysians of different cultures and religions to stage this concert and make it a success. These are events *based on* and *inspired by* the common cultural and religious ethos and values such as peace, justice, forgiveness, harmony, reconciliation, solidarity, cooperation, partnership and mutual support.

The public meaning that we offer through the concert itself is that in the post-911-world, most Malaysians are keen to promote world peace, beginning with ourselves in our neighbourhood. At the same time, we take the occasion to denounce any form of unilateral pre-emptive military violence or *Jihadized* violence and terrorism that are in themselves a deplorable “war on world peace.” The spiral of violence not only widens the chasm between the Euro-American nations and the Islamic nations in the world but it poses an unprecedented threat to the state of peace in our world.

A certain parallel understanding can be drawn in relation to the 18<sup>th</sup> EAROPH Conference: just as the WPC organizers and the collaborators intend to inculcate the above-mentioned cultural and religious ethos and values, it is equally desirable and imperative for any life-sustaining governance to draw upon the life-giving cultural and religious ethos and values of the ethnic communities therein and have the ethos and values institutionalized and implemented through the various governing laws, policies and regulations.

The deliberation on the life-giving pulses of good governance leads to a related discussion on the anthropological profile of the person who governs. Allow me to suggest an emergent anthropology of a *homo solidarius* – that is a person who is in solidarity with others, especially the marginalized and the oppressed.

In a recent document known as *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (“The Social Concern Of The Church”) issued by Pope John Paul II, solidarity is explained in no.38 as “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes” of others but “it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself” to the common good.<sup>3</sup> Solidarity involves “a commitment to the good of one’s neighbour with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to “lose oneself” for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him/her, and to “serve him/her” instead of oppressing him/her for one’s own advantage (cf. Matthew 10:40-42; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27).<sup>4</sup> John Paul II further explains that solidarity involves an ultimate sacrifice: “one’s neighbour must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready to sacrifice, even the ultimate: to lay down one’s life for the brethren (cf. 1 John 3:16).”

When the person who governs are exemplary *homo solidarius*, they will be committed to the good of the people whom they govern and they will take cognizance of the cultural and religious ethos and values of the people. Besides they will gladly embody the said ethos and values and translate them into policies that sustain and improve the quality of life in a geographical region. As *homo solidarius*, they are not ego-maniacs who merely have their own interests at heart. But *homo solidarius* are persons who shatter boundaries of ethnicity, cultures and religions. They are prepared to reach out and serve the marginalized and oppressed, and even persons of a diametrically opposed ideology, to the point of giving up their lives out of love for the “cultural and religious” Other.

Leadership by example (*teladan melalui teladan*) is one of key guiding principles of the *homo solidarius*. When persons who govern live and lead by examples, there is every reason to believe that the life-giving pulses of good governance, i.e., cultural and religious ethos and values, will be emulated and translated into actions. The ripple effect is enormous – persons of good governance becomes *homo solidarius* who in turn inspire the inhabitants to become *homo solidarius*.

Having discussed good governance as strengthening the interrelatedness between people of diverse background, I like to deliberate on the importance of

good governance as promoting the interrelatedness between humankind and the environment.

## **2. Interrelations Between Humankind And Environment**

Good governance needs to be emphatic about regulating and promoting a life-sustaining relation between humankind and the environment.

Our relationship with the environment/nature is multifaceted, complicated and even conflictual because human civilization represents a cultural niche that human beings have established within nature.<sup>5</sup> The historical niche represents the presence of humankind in the evolutionary process of nature. The fact is that humankind only emerges after what Samuel Rayan describes as the process of divergence and convergence which brought forth the flora and fauna of the earth.<sup>6</sup> This historical emergence of humankind does not denote any sense of being above or apart from nature. On the contrary, as Rayan explains, there is an intimate nexus between culture and nature. The relation is not in terms of hierarchy but interrelatedness. In the emergence of the cultural niche on the planet earth, Rayan believes that the earth “finally becomes mind and heart, self conscious and free.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he argues that “the human is of the flesh of the earth ... the point of convergence of the rest of life where the earth’s awareness, sensitivity, freedom and love and joy gather, come to focus and become incandescent.”<sup>8</sup>

Good governance has to foster a relation of mutuality and interrelatedness thus exists between nature and humankind. The mutual significance of the environment to humankind has to be worked into a new understanding of an inviolable human dignity. Yet this inviolability needs to be reworked, rescuing it from its utter anthropocentricity. It has to include a dimension of the inviolability of nature that provides a space or the urban habitat of humankind. Ecologically speaking, if nature is real, constitutive of humankind, and created by God, then our inviolable human dignity is dependent on our love for our neighbour and the environment. We have to learn to love nature as God’s best gift to humankind.

This agapeic imperative that determines human relationship thus becomes, in Andrew Christiansen’s term, “a cosmological principle.”<sup>9</sup> It is a principle that determines our communion with nature in a way that calls us beyond a selfish exploitation of nature.<sup>10</sup> Cowdin believes that human dignity is dependent upon being human in nature. It entails that we “bring our most distinctively human capacities to bear in our interaction with it.”<sup>11</sup> Cowdin further contends that “to do nothing but exploit nature is either a fulfillment nor a consequence of human dignity, it is an abdication of it.”<sup>12</sup>

Good governance must regard the environment as organic and that it is in a communicative relation with humankind. Jeremy Narby, a Canadian Anthropologist, has used an interdisciplinary method (anthropology and molecular biology) to establish that the global network of DNA-based life is “minded.”<sup>13</sup> Narby argues that human beings such as the shamans have the capacity to “communicate in defocalized consciousness with the global network of DNA-based life” by taking “their consciousness down to the molecular level and gain access to biomolecular information.”<sup>14</sup> Humankind is part and parcel of the earth’s ecosystem and interplanetary consciousness.

This deliberation on the relation of good governance and the regulation of humankind in relation to the environment again surfaces an anthropological question: who are we and what is our role as humankind?

The Christian story of creation has been unfortunately (mis)interpreted to concede absolute power to humankind who has relentlessly conquered and exploited the environment/nature for generations without due consideration for the carrying capacity of the earth and the needs of future generation of humankind. Chapters 2-11 of Genesis actually sets humankind as part of the created universe and as such the place of humankind is relative to the environment. Richard Clifford states that humankind has to “act within a history of cause and effect” as humankind “is thoroughly rooted in its environment, and is subjected to a just and powerful God.”<sup>15</sup>

Within this parameter, co-creatorship is never biblically founded on an instrumental domination of nature as on the exercise of responsible trusteeship in a manner befitting a cosmos created in God’s image and likeness. Humankind has to exercise a role that manifest God’s reign in the world. It will be a reign that “is limited on the one hand by the divinely articulated system of which human beings are a part and on the other by God in whose name the race exercises its rule.”<sup>16</sup> Samuel Rayan postulates that dominion should be construed as a humble service of creation as a wounded neighbour (Luke 10:25-37), patterned after Jesus’ lordship and masterhood as feet-washing (John 13).

In support of Clifford, I maintain that the female and male sexuality is the human version of the capacity for generativity which is inherent in the life-forms that sustains the universe.<sup>17</sup> This generativity resonates with the exposition of Rabbi Hayim G. Perelmuter. According to Perelmuter, *rada* is a term in the Talmud (Yebamot 65b) that translates as “rule” which suggests “procreation” and not ‘mastery.’<sup>18</sup> I prefer to go beyond the gender-specific notion of procreation as a biological process and highlight *rada* as a state of being life-giving and life-sustaining. Since androcentric religions and sciences have so dehumanized the earth, this postulation suggests that *rada* highlights the

realized capacity of humankind not so much to conquer and dominate nature but to sustain and enhance it.

A befitting role that good governance has to promote is that humankind are agentive and directional co-creators who collaborate actively with the Creator. Humankind is agentive in the sense that Ronald Inden defines agency: “the realized capacity of people to act effectively upon their world ... in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live.”<sup>19</sup> Human agency is directional in that we have to negotiate the current ecological crisis and maneuver the earth community in such a direction that nature is no longer under threat from humankind but enjoys a harmonious relationship.

Good urban governance needs to discover more the ramification of this co-creational model so that humankind becomes more eco-sensitive and friendly. I agree with John Pawlikowshi that “humanity is now being summoned to an unprecedented exercise of its role of ‘dominion’ over creation... humankind now stands centerstage in the process ... we now recognize that we must go to great lengths to recover a sense of healing and directive power of the divine presence ... a responsibility whose full dimensions are only beginning to unfold in our time.”<sup>20</sup>

For humankind to have a harmonious relation with the environment/nature, good urban governance has to advocate this co-creational model and systematically implemented this concept through its law, policies and regulations of a given society.

## **Conclusion**

Good urban governance is an exercise that needs to draw its inspiration and strength from the cultural and religious ethos and values since these serve as its life-giving pulses. The infrastructure of good governance is never enough on its own without governors who are exemplary *homo solidarius*. Governors need to inspire and multiple others so that they in turn become *homo solidarius* themselves. In addition, governors have to awaken and heighten the inhabitants’ role as co-creators so that humankind enters into an ever harmonious and sustaining relationship with the environment/nature. Ultimately, good governance has to be life-giving to people and life-sustaining to the earth community.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (USA: Basic Books, 1973) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>3</sup> See David J. O' Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992) 421.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 422.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I intend the two terms "environment" and "nature" to be used interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Rayan, "Theological Perspectives on the Environmental Crisis," in *Frontiers in Asian Critical Theology: Emerging Trends*, R.S. Sugitharajah (ed.), (New York: Orbis Books), 223.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Christiansen, "Nature's God and the God of Love," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Cowdin, "Toward and Environmental Ethic," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics*, 134.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Narby, *The Cosmic Serpent DNA And The Origins Of Knowledge* (USA: Tarcher/ Putnam Books, 2001) 145.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 132, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Clifford, "The Bible and the Environment," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Hayim G. Perelmuter, "Do not destroy – Ecology in the Fabric of Judaism," in *The Ecological Challenge: Ethical, Liturgical and Spiritual Responses* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994) 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 23.

<sup>20</sup> John T. Pawlikowski, "Theological Dimension of an Ecological Ethic," in *The Ecological Challenge: Ethical, Liturgical and Spiritual Responses*, 45-6.

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